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SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

In which the Lord of Dreams returns to Hell, and his confrontation with the Lord of that realm; in which a number of doors are closed for the last time; and of the strange disposition of a knife and key.

the

SANDMAN™

SEASON OF MISTS 2

gaiman jones jones III

CONVERSION BY WILDSTORM

There is a wind that blows between the worlds. A cold wind.

It screams silently through the empty places, the nothing wind, traveling from nowhere to nowhere, in the uncreated wastes.

I am so cold.

This is not a place, after all. It is BETWEEN places.

This is NOWHERE.

A brief thought: I could stay here, abandon my quest, hang forever in the void, safe and cold and alone.

NO.

We do as we must do.

And already the wind is dying back, signaling the transition from nowhere to WHERE.

Already the mists are parting.

"Welcome to Hell," I tell myself. And I am afraid.

Welcome to Hell.

The doors to Hell are legion.

There are entrances less-well-guarded than this one, gates more poorly defended.

But I am here as Dream of the Endless. I wear my helm of office. I am caparisoned formally. I have no choice but to use the Main Gate.

If necessary, I am prepared to storm the gateway. To force an entry. I have power enough to do that.

It is no great task. I can open doors.

Even the Doors of Hell.

SEASON of MISTS Chapter ~ 2

In which the Lord of Dreams returns to Hell; his confrontation with the Lord of that realm; in which a number of doors are closed for the last time; and of the strange disposition of a knife and a key.

There is, however, no need for that. Not now.

It would seem my visit has been anticipated.

The gates of Hell are open.

Unopposed, I enter Hell.

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The landscape of Hell is mutable, if one has authority. And I have certain authority, even here.

Warily, I feel for the place I seek.

Nada is held in the cliffs that circle Weep-not, in a barred cell carved from rock, lined with needle-sharp shards of volcanic glass. There is no food or water in that place.

I suppose that she must be hungry.

She must have been hungry for a long time.

I find my destination, and in finding it...

...I am there.

Strange.

I cannot believe that my task can be this simple.

But perhaps it will be.

Perhaps I will simply inform Nada that she is free, and we will leave this place together, unchallenged and unharmed.

Perhaps...

Nada?

NADAAAA!

And I think:

They have taken her.

They have hidden her from me.

And then I think:

There is something deeply wrong.

Even for Hell, there is something wrong...

I listen.

Silence, pure and dead.

I feel, with my mind.

Nothing.

It is not just Nada who has gone.

They have all gone. The dead, and the never-born. All of them.

Where are they?

Where is she?

What trickery is this?

LUCIFER?

LUCIFER!

YES?

Lucifer.
Where is she? What have you done to her? Where have you hidden her?

HELLO, DREAM.
TAKE OFF THAT SILLY HELMET, AND WE'LL TALK.

I will not be tricked by you, Lucifer Morningstar.

WHY, SWEET MORPHEUS...
...ARE YOU *SCARED* OF ME?

Yes.

VERY WELL. THEN I GIVE YOU MY WORD THAT *WHILE* WE ARE *WITHIN* THE *BOUNDS* OF *HELL*, I WILL DO *NOTHING* TO HARM YOU.
THERE. NOW TAKE OFF YOUR HELMET, AND I'LL TELL YOU WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOUR *LADY-LOVE* --AND THE *REST* OF THEM...

THERE. *MUCH* BETTER.
NOW, DO YOU *STILL* WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON?
Yes.
ISN'T IT *OBVIOUS*, DREAM KING?

I'VE *QUIT*.

HONESTLY, MORPHEUS. YOU NEED NOT STARE AT US--AT ME, RATHER--WITH THAT RIDICULOUS EXPRESSION ON YOUR FACE.

I do not understand. There is some trick here, some stratagem or ruse...

NO.

I'VE STOPPED. I'VE RESIGNED. I AM LEAVING.

CAN I MAKE MYSELF ANY PLAINER?

You... you refer to yourself in the singular, Morningstar.

EXACTLY. I AM NO KING, MORPHEUS. NOT ANY MORE.

LOOK, IF YOU WANDER AROUND WITH ME FOR A BIT, I'LL EXPLAIN THE WHOLE THING TO YOU.

THERE ARE A FEW THINGS I HAVE TO DO ON THE WAY, THOUGH.

DO YOU MIND?

Do I have a choice?

OF COURSE YOU DO.

EITHER YOU CAN SIT HERE AND WAIT, AND WHEN I'VE FINISHED, I'LL COME BACK AND PICK YOU UP. OR YOU CAN TRAVEL BESIDE ME...

I will go with you.

GOOD.

LET'S SEE... THERE'S A *FINAL HOLDOUT SOUL* IN THE SLABS ABOVE THE *STARVING JUBILEE*. WE'LL TACKLE *HIM* FIRST, *SHALL WE?*

THEN THE LAST FEW DEMONS, *THEN* THE GATES.

AND *THEN* WE'RE *DONE.*

Lucifer... it seems to go on forever.

How big IS Hell?

HOW *BIG?*

IT'S *VAST.*

EVEN *I* COULDN'T SAY FOR *CERTAIN* EXACTLY *HOW* VAST. IT'S *ALMOST* A MEANINGLESS QUESTION--LIKE ASKING HOW *BIG* THE *SILVER CITY* IS, OR HOW MANY ARE THE *FIELDS* OF *PARADISE.*

THIS REALM *IS* HEAVEN'S SHADOW, REMEMBER.

OR, MORE *PRECISELY*, PERHAPS, *HEAVEN'S DARK REFLECTION*-- LIKE A *LANDSCAPE* HANGING *INVERTED* IN THE *WATERS* OF A *LAKE...*

AH. HERE WE ARE.

YOU!

DID YOU NOT HEAR MY *PROCLAMATION?* YOU ARE *FREE.*

I... WILL... NOT... *LEAVE.*

OH, BUT YOU *WILL* LEAVE.

I AM RECEIVING MY JUST PUNISHMENT FOR MY CRIMES COMMITTED WHILE I WAS ALIVE. FOR MY CRIMES WERE *MONSTROUS* THINGS.

YOU...DO... NOT *UNDERSTAND*. I AM *BRESCHAU*.

SO?

I DON'T *CARE* ABOUT YOUR CRIMES. I WANT YOU *OUT* OF HERE.

DEMON, I WILL NOT BE FOOLED BY YOUR PRATTLE.

I AM *BRESCHAU* OF *LIVONIA*. I RIPPED OUT THE TONGUES OF THOSE WHO SPOKE AGAINST ME, AND CUT THE UNBORN BABES FROM THE WOMBS OF MY ENEMIES' WOMEN, THAT THEY WOULD NOT BECOME WARRIORS TO RISE AGAINST ME.

I TOOK MY MOTHER BY FORCE, AND I STRANGLED MY SISTER WHEN SHE WOULD NOT CONSENT TO MY ADVANCES.

SOON MY NAME WAS WHISPERED IN THE NIGHT BY MOTHERS TO TERRIFY THEIR BABES INTO OBEDIENCE. I AM *BRESCHAU* WHO BATHED IN THE BLOOD OF CHILDREN.

I AM BRESCHAU, WHO FORCED THE TRUE PROPHETS OF THE LORD TO DANCE UPON PLATES OF IRON, UNDER WHICH FIRES WERE BURNING, AND I *LAUGHED* AS THEY DANCED.

I AM BRESCHAU, AND WHEN MY MISTRESS WAS UNFAITHFUL, I CUT THE NOSE FROM HER FACE, AND WORE IT ABOUT MY NECK.

AS FOR THE WOMAN, I HAD HER SEWN TO HER LOVER, AND, SKIN TO SKIN, I LEFT THEM IN THE DESERT TO BE EATEN BY RAVENS, AND I LAUGHED AS I HEARD THEM *SCREAM*.

I AM BRESCHAU, AND *THIS IS MY PUNISHMENT*.

YOU MUST GO.

DID YOU NOT HEAR ME, FIEND? I HAVE KILLED--

I HEARD. YOU KILLED A NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO BY NOW WOULD BE LONG-SINCE DEAD ANYWAY. SO WHAT?

YOU'VE BEEN CHAINED TO THIS SLAB FOR ELEVEN HUNDRED YEARS. HAVEN'T YOU TORTURED YOURSELF ENOUGH?

IT'S NOT ME THAT IS TORTURING ME. IT'S THE VENGEANCE OF THE LORD-- DID YOU NOT HEAR? I--

--AM BRESCHAU. YES, I KNOW.

BUT NO ONE TODAY REMEMBERS BRESCHAU.

NO ONE.

I DOUBT ONE LIVING MORTAL IN A HUNDRED THOUSAND COULD EVEN POINT TO WHERE LIVONIA USED TO BE, ON A MAP.

THE WORLD HAS FORGOTTEN YOU.

BUT... I... AM...

ENOUGH. GO.

Where has he gone?

Lucifer-- I do not understand--

AWAY.

HMM--NOW, DOWN TO THE WANING STRAND FOR THE LAST FEW STRAGGLERS.

BUT IT'S PERFECTLY PLAIN, MORPHEUS. IT'S OVER.

WAIT. THESE ARE THE *LAST* THAT I HAVE TO DEAL WITH.

YOU. LITTLE DEMONS. *YOU* HEARD MY ORDER. *WHY* ARE YOU NOT *GONE* FROM THIS PLACE?

DON'T *ANSWER* HIM, KETELE.

I *SAY* WHAT I *LIKE*, RIMMON-MY-PETAL.

WHY?

BECAUSE I DO *NOT* BELIEVE THAT *THIS PATHETIC* CREATURE IS *TRULY* OUR *LORD* LUCIFER.

WOULD THE *LORD* OF HELL *DESTROY* HIS REALM?

WOULD THE *LORD* OF HELL *EVER* FREE THE *SOULS HELD IN TORMENT?*

WOULD THE *LORD* OF HELL *EXPEL* THE *NEVER-BORN?*

WOULD THE *LORD* OF HELL *ABANDON* THE *WAR WITH HEAVEN?*

THE LORD OF *HELL* WILL DO WHAT HE *DAMN* WELL *LIKES.*

LEAVE. *NOW.* ALL OF YOU.

THERE. THOSE WERE THE LAST OF THEM.

WE'RE THE ONLY ENTITIES LEFT IN HELL, MORPHEUS.

I WAS THE FIRST ONE HERE. AND IT LOOKS LIKE I'M GOING TO BE THE LAST.

Lucifer? What is happening?

I KEEP TELLING YOU, DREAM LORD.

IT'S OVER.

I AM LEAVING. AND I HAVE CLOSED DOWN HELL.

How? How can you even...?

EASY.

TEN BILLION YEARS I'VE SPENT IN THIS PLACE. THAT'S A LONG TIME...

...AND WE'VE ALL CHANGED, SINCE THE BEGINNING.

EVEN YOU, DREAM LORD. YOU WERE VERY DIFFERENT BACK THEN.

Perhaps, Prince Lucifer.

YOU CAN FORGET THE HONORIFICS. RANK NEVER MATTERED TO ME, NOT REALLY. BUT THE DEMONS EXPECTED IT...

...WHICH IS ONE REASON I'VE QUIT. THERE ARE OTHERS...

I'M TIRED, MORPHEUS. SO TIRED.

YOU KNEW ME, DREAM. YOU KNEW ME WHEN I WAS AN ANGEL.

WHAT WAS I LIKE?

You were very proud, Samael. But you were also very beautiful, and wise -- and passionate.

WAS I? YES... YES, I WAS. I CARED ABOUT SO MANY THINGS. I CARED SO DEEPLY, BACK THEN, IN THE COLD AT THE BEGINNING OF THINGS. IN THE SILVER CITY.

"I SUPPOSE THAT WAS WHY EVERYTHING BEGAN TO GO WRONG.

"YOU KNOW...I STILL WONDER HOW MUCH OF IT WAS PLANNED. HOW MUCH OF IT HE KNEW IN ADVANCE."

I THOUGHT I WAS REBELLING. I THOUGHT I WAS DEFYING HIS RULE.

NO... I WAS MERELY FULFILLING ANOTHER TINY SEGMENT OF HIS GREAT AND POWERFUL PLAN.

IF I HAD NOT REBELLED, ANOTHER WOULD HAVE, IN MY STEAD. RAGUEL, PERHAPS. OR SANDALPHON.

"WE FELL, MY COMRADES IN ARMS AND I. WE FELL SO FAR...SO LONG..."

"AND AFTER AN ETERNITY OF FALLING, WE CAME TO REST IN THIS PLACE."

"AND I KNEW THEN THAT THERE WAS NO WAY THAT I WOULD EVER RETURN TO PARADISE..."

BUT I'M WOOLGATHERING. I APOLOGIZE.

YOU DO NOT MIND IF I **WORK** AS WE TALK? THERE ARE **NO** MORE **ENTITIES** LEFT WITHIN THE BOUNDS INFERNAL. BUT I NEED TO **SECURE** THE LAST **GATES.**

No. I do not mind.

I HAVE **SEALED** OR **ERASED** MOST OF THE GATEWAYS. THERE ARE ONLY A **FEW** I NEED TO SECURE **PERSONALLY.**

YOU **ALSO** RULE A WORLD, MORPHEUS. A WORLD OF **SLEEPERS** AND **DREAMERS.** OF **STORIES.** A SIMPLE PLACE -- COMPARED TO **HELL.**

I **ENVY** YOU.

CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT IT WAS **LIKE?**

TEN BILLION YEARS SPENT PROVIDING A PLACE FOR **DEAD MORTALS** TO **TORTURE** THEMSELVES.

AND LIKE **ALL** MASOCHISTS **THEY** CALLED THE SHOTS -- "BURN ME" "FREEZE ME" "EAT ME" "HURT ME"...

AND WE **DID.**

AND THEN THERE WERE THE *DEMONKIND*. IMAGINE BEING *THEIR* LORD AND MASTER.

A *HANDFUL* OF THEM WERE ONCE ANGELS, WHO *FELL* WITH ME AT THE *DAWN*. OTHERS STRAYED HERE FROM *ELSEWHERE*, OVER THE AEONS, MAKING *THIS* PLACE A *HOME*.

AND *SOON* I FOUND MYSELF THEIR *LORD AND MASTER*. A *MILLION* OF THEM, OR MORE, *SQUABBLING* AND *WARRING* AND *CARRYING ON*...

I WATCHED THEIR *STRANGE* LITTLE *FASHIONS*. THE *CENTURIES* THEY SPENT *WEARING* THE BODIES OF *ANIMALS*...

THE RIDICULOUS *VOGUE* FOR *RHYME* TO DENOTE *STATUS*--DEMONS WHO SPOKE *EXCLUSIVELY* IN *VILLANELLES, HAIKU* OR *TRIOLETS*...

AND ABOVE *ALL*, THE *FASHION* IN *INTRIGUE*.

IN THE *BEGINNING* I *ENJOYED* IT.

I WAS--I *AM*--MORE POWERFUL THAN *ANY* OF THEM. I COULD HAVE *DESTROYED* ANY OF THEM--PERHAPS EVEN *ALL* OF THEM--WITHOUT *MUCH* EFFORT.

SO I *MANIPULATED* THEM; SET THEM *ONE* AGAINST THE *OTHER*; LET THEM *FACTION* AND *DIVIDE* AND *PLOT*.

BUT...

BUT I GREW *WEARY*, DREAM LORD. *MIGHTILY* WEARY.

I CEASED TO *CARE*.

AND THE MORTALS! I ASK YOU-- WHY?

TELL ME THAT-- WHY?

"Why" what, first among the fallen?

WHY DO THEY BLAME ME FOR ALL THEIR LITTLE FAILINGS?

THEY USE MY NAME AS IF I SPEND MY ENTIRE DAY SITTING ON THEIR SHOULDERS, FORCING THEM TO COMMIT ACTS THEY WOULD OTHERWISE FIND REPULSIVE.

"THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT."

I HAVE NEVER MADE ONE OF THEM DO ANYTHING.

NEVER.

THEY LIVE THEIR OWN TINY LIVES. I DO NOT LIVE THEIR LIVES FOR THEM.

AND THEN THEY DIE, AND THEY COME HERE (HAVING TRANSGRESSED AGAINST WHAT THEY BELIEVED TO BE RIGHT), AND EXPECT US TO FULFILL THEIR DESIRE FOR PAIN AND RETRIBUTION.

I DON'T MAKE THEM COME HERE.

THEY TALK OF ME GOING AROUND AND BUYING SOULS, LIKE A FISHWIFE COME MARKET DAY, NEVER STOPPING TO ASK THEMSELVES WHY.

I NEED NO SOULS.

AND HOW CAN ANYONE OWN A SOUL?

NO. THEY BELONG TO THEMSELVES...

...THEY JUST HATE TO HAVE TO FACE UP TO IT.

YES, I REBELLED. IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO. HOW LONG WAS I MEANT TO PAY FOR THAT ONE ACTION?

SO NOW IT'S OVER.

I HAVE SENT ALL OF THEM AWAY--ALL OF HELL'S INHABITANTS.

Where... have you sent them?

AWAY. I DON'T CARE WHERE THEY'VE GONE. HEAVEN. EARTH. LIMBO. THE FAR REALMS. WHO KNOWS?

BUT THEY WON'T BE COMING HERE ANY MORE.

HELL IS OVER.

And what will you do now?

I DON'T KNOW. TO BE HONEST, DREAM LORD, I HAVE NOT GIVEN IT MUCH THOUGHT.

I COULD NOT RETURN TO THE SILVER CITY--EVEN IF I WISHED TO. I COULD NEVER AGAIN BE AN ANGEL...

INNOCENCE, ONCE LOST, CAN NEVER BE REGAINED.

WHAT WILL I DO NOW?

I COULD LIE ON A *BEACH*, SOMEWHERE, PERHAPS? LISTEN TO *MUSIC*? BUILD A *HOUSE*?

LEARN HOW TO *DANCE*, OR TO *PLAY* THE *PIANO*?

IT MATTERS *NOT*. I HAVE HAD MY *FILL* OF THE OLD LIFE. AND *THAT* IS ALL I CARE ABOUT.

STRANGELY ENOUGH, DREAM LORD, I OWE MY DECISION TO *YOU*.

To me?

YES. TO *YOU*.

IT WAS WHEN I HEARD YOU WERE *COMING*...

I thought... I thought that we would fight, Prince Lucifer.

THAT WAS WHAT GAVE ME THE *IMPETUS* TO *DO* THIS-- TO DO WHAT I SHOULD HAVE DONE *MILLENNIA* AGO.

PERHAPS THIS IS THE *ULTIMATE FREEDOM*, EH, DREAMLORD? THE *FREEDOM* TO *LEAVE*...

FIGHT? NO. *NO* FIGHTING. I'M *TIRED* OF FIGHTING, MORPHEUS.

But-- your responsibilities?

I *HAVE* NO RESPONSIBILITIES.

NOT ANY *MORE*.

THERE. THAT WAS THE *LAST* OF THE *GATES*. ALL ENTRANCES AND EXITS ARE *SEALED*.

HELL IS *CLOSED*.

NGY ROAHD RUSZCIVAH...

NGREEKINGHSZ, NGY RROAHD...

MAZIKEEN? WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE? I AM YOUR LORD NO LONGER, CHILD.

NGO. HEOU ARE SHZKILL NGY RROAHRD. I RILL NGOT VORSZHAKE HEOU...

HAI HRUVV HEOU, NGARSSHTER...

I AM NO LONGER YOUR MASTER, MAZIKEEN.

BUT YOU MAY LOVE ME, IF YOU WISH.

LET ME INTRODUCE YOU. DREAM OF THE ENDLESS, THIS IS MAZIKEEN, A DAUGHTER OF LILITH.

MAZIKEEN, THIS IS DREAM.

RHUCIVAH. WHERE HEOU NGO, I RILL VFORROW. RETT NGE NGO RIZH HEOU. HRREEZSE.

I NUZSHT SHTAY VHY HEOUR SZHIDZE VOR EFFHVER.

STAY BY MY SIDE? HMM.

MAZIKEEN. GIVE ME YOUR KNIFE.

SZIRE?

MAZIKEEN: YOU MAY NOT GO WITH ME. I AM SORRY.

I DO NOT KNOW WHERE I AM GOING, BUT WHEREVER I GO, I WILL BE TRAVELING ALONE.

COME CLOSE TO ME.

IT IS ENOUGH FOR ME TO KNOW THAT YOU CARE FOR ME, MAZIKEEN. I THANK YOU.

NOW GO.

GOODBYE, MAZIKEEN.

YOU ARE VERY BEAUTIFUL.

MORPHEUS. YOU MUST CUT OFF MY WINGS.

IT IS THE LAST THING THAT NEEDS DOING.

PLEASE, DO THIS THING FOR ME.

Very well, Lucifer. If that is truly what you wish.

Lucifer.

I came here for a woman. To free her. To apologize to her.

Her name is Nada. She was...

AAAHHIIHEE!

YES...I...RE... MEMBER...HER.

Where is she, Morningstar?

HH. AH. HH.

OUT THERE... SOMEWHERE.

THERE ARE...SO *MANY* OF THEM...

ALL MY LITTLE... DISEMBODIED REFUGEES... FLUTTERING AWAY THROUGH THE DIMENSIONS...

AND *WHAT* WILL THEY *DO* ON *EARTH*... I WONDER...WHEN THE *DEAD* START COMING *BACK*?

PERHAPS YOU'LL FIND THE *WOMAN*, DREAM KING. I WISH YOU *LUCK*.

NOW, YOU RETURN TO YOUR REALM, AND I WILL TAKE MY LEAVE OF *MINE*.

OH--*MORPHEUS*?

I SWORE ONCE THAT I WOULD *DESTROY* YOU, DID I *NOT*?

Yes. You did.

WELL, WE *ARE* NOW *OUTSIDE* THE *BOUNDS* OF HELL...

THIS IS FOR *YOU*, DREAM LORD. *TAKE IT*.

The Key to Hell?

EXACTLY. IT'S *YOURS* NOW.

PERHAPS IT *WILL* DESTROY YOU, AND *PERHAPS* IT *WON'T*.

BUT I *DOUBT* IT WILL MAKE YOUR LIFE *ANY* EASIER.

IT'S ALL *YOURS*, NOW, MORPHEUS.

YOU'RE THE *SOLE MONARCH* OF A *LOCKED* AND *EMPTY* HELL.

PERHAPS I *OUGHT* TO HAVE GIVEN IT TO YOU WITH MY *BEST WISHES*. I *COULD* HAVE TOLD YOU THAT I *HOPED* IT WOULD BRING YOU *HAPPINESS*.

BUT *SOMEHOW*...

...SOMEHOW I DOUBT IT *WILL*.

I feel cold.

To Be Continued

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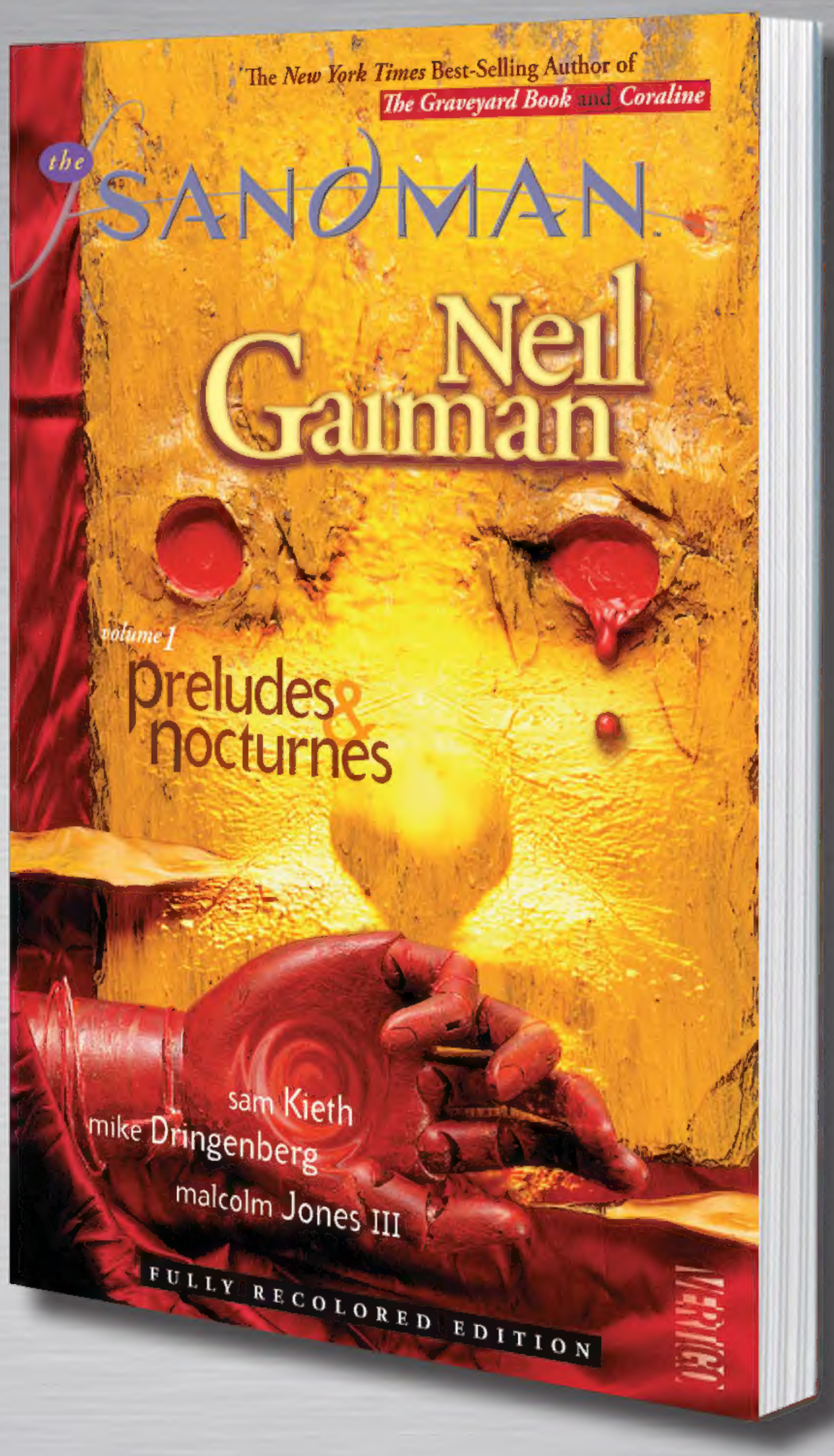

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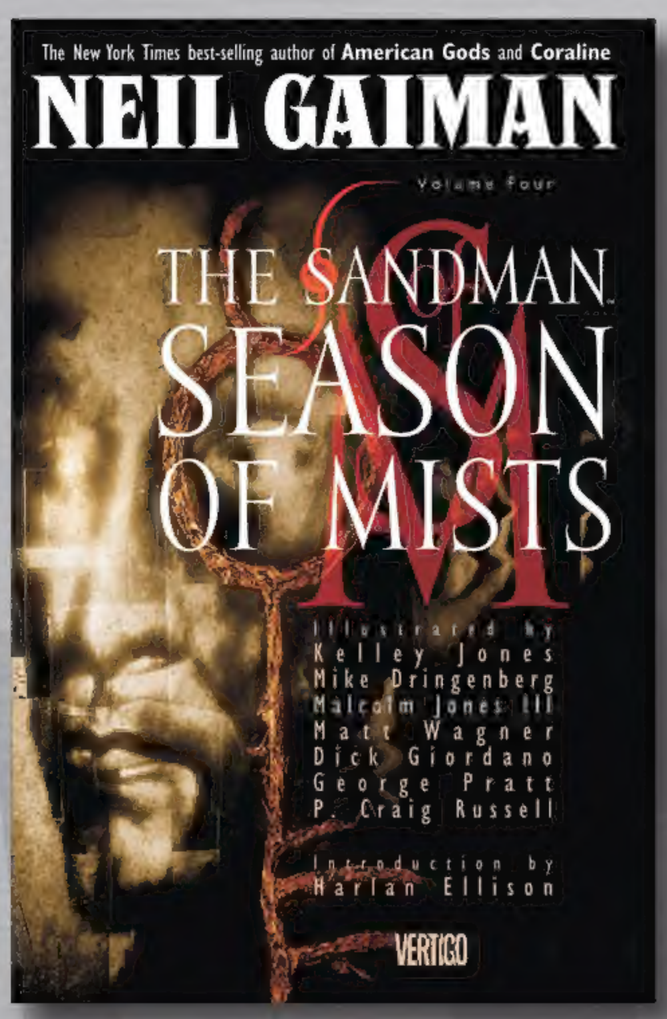

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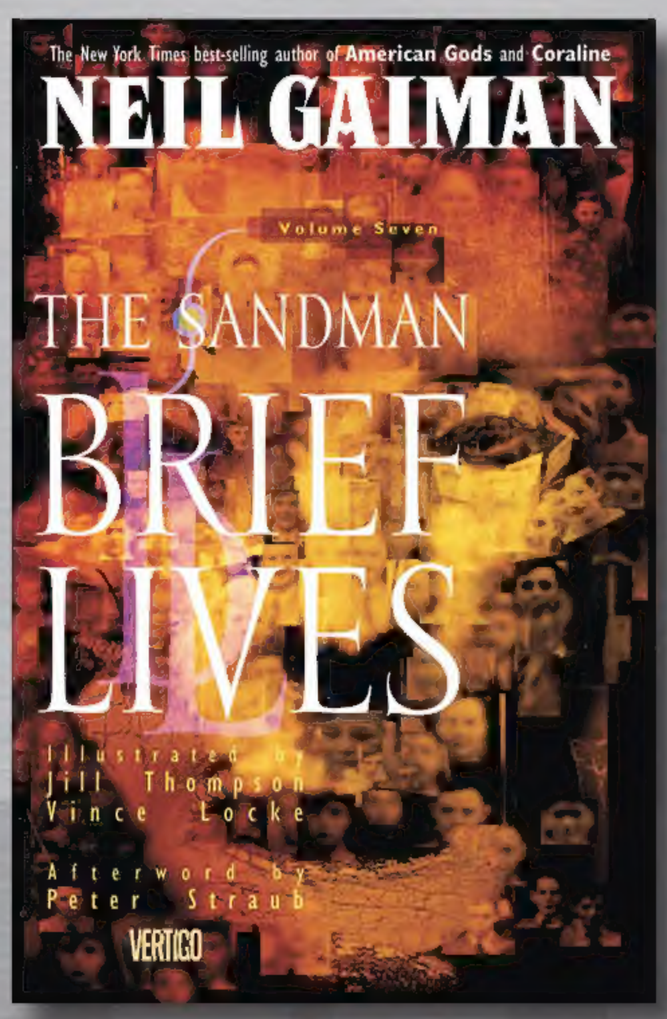

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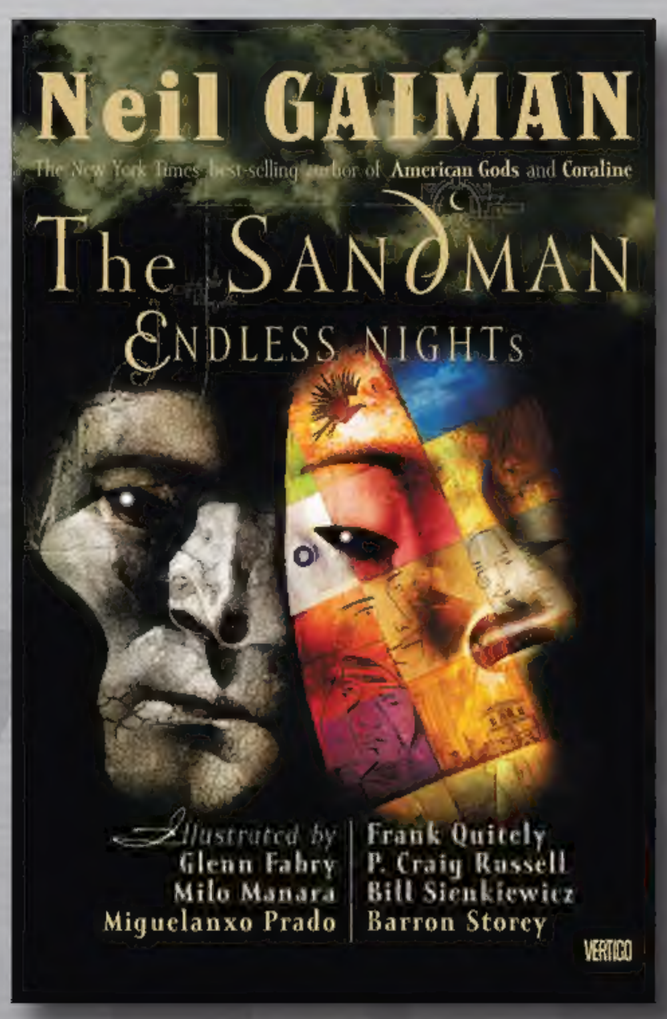

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